

2008-04-26 LA Times - Congressman Revels in His Ultra-Liberal Rating

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National Journal again names the unapologetic Rep. Stark of Fremont the left-most lawmaker in a country that's been sliding right for decades.

The LA Times

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FREMONT, Calif. — Forget Berkeley, Cambridge, Santa Monica or those other left-wing bastions.

To find the most liberal member of the U.S. House of Representatives, come here to the blue-collar side of San Francisco Bay where, amid the sprouting subdivisions and ethnic neighborhoods, Fortney "Pete" Stark (D-Fremont) has charted an unswerving leftward course for more than three decades.

Antiwar? Check. Pro-gun control? Check. Opposes bans on gay marriage and late-term abortions? Check, and check.

National Journal, the policy bible and political field guide to Washington, has devised a formula for ranking members of Congress based on their votes on more than 100 foreign policy, economic and social issues. For the last two years, Stark has finished at the very top — or bottom, depending — as the leftmost lawmaker on the left-right scale.

Others might shun the liberal label, which is about as politically fashionable these days as Earth Shoes and woolly sideburns. Not the combustible Stark, who says he "greened in the '60s" and reveled in his image back then — here's an oxymoron for you — as a "hippie banker."

"I only won by .5 of a point," Stark says of his latest first-place showing. "But it's nice."

Actually, the margin was .3%, putting Stark just ahead of Georgia's cop-slugging Democratic Rep. Cynthia McKinney. But there is no quibbling with his longevity, or denying the delight he takes in trashing Republicans — particularly the "witch-burners," as he dubs the most zealous Christian conservatives.

"You'll get the death penalty soon for not saying the Lord's Prayer right," he scoffs.

Stark can seem harmless enough, bantering with the hostess at an Italian restaurant here in his East Bay district. At 74, he is a bit stooped, with a slight hitch in his step. His steel-gray hair has gone white at the temples and his oval glasses and long, pleated face give him the look of an erudite bloodhound.

But Stark is proof that age doesn't necessarily mellow. It certainly hasn't stilled his tongue, which can be scathing even by today's belligerent standards. Ask about regrets, and he allows that some of his more provocative quotes over the years were "unnecessary."

He once called the American Medical Assn. a bunch of "greedy troglodytes." He skewered one well-respected Republican colleague as "a whore for the insurance industry," another as a "fruitcake" and a third as a "fascist." He referred to House leaders as President George W. Bush's "Republican henchmen," and nearly provoked a fistfight on the House floor by accusing a GOP leader of fathering several children outside of marriage.

Well, actually, no regrets about that last one. His only mistake, Stark says, was that he got the number wrong. Former Rep. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma had two children out of wedlock. "If I just said it as a way to ding him, to get him mad," Stark says, before trailing off. The comment came during a debate over welfare policy and marriage.

"Politics you're not supposed to personalize," Stark says, picking his way through a Dungeness crab salad. But, he went on, "I can't not, in extreme cases, personalize people who I think are harming other people."

Stark began his political life as a nominal Republican, the party of his parents growing up in Milwaukee. (Fortney, a name he never uses, was the work of Grandma Elsa, a product of German stock, who thought it sounded classier than Hans, Herman or Gottfried.)

When Stark moved to the Bay Area in 1957, the Air Force veteran and MIT graduate became a banker and registered with the GOP because he "wanted to be a successful businessperson, and that's what a successful businessperson did."

But the Vietnam War, which he vehemently opposed, as he does the Iraq conflict, led Stark to switch parties. He also concocted a novel protest that helped launch his political career. He put peace symbols on the checks of his Security National Bank, and a giant peace sign on the roof of its Walnut Creek headquarters. The stunt won national attention, boosted his bank's deposits and drew the kind of annoyed attention that Stark seems to relish.

He admits a certain calculation. "It's awfully hard to differentiate a bank," he says, and "a pain in the butt" to switch checking accounts, which many people did as a result. But there is no mistaking his pleasure all these years later as he recalls evading local zoning laws — and the frowning city fathers of Walnut Creek — by declaring his peace sign an exempted "work of art."

Stark was elected to Congress in 1972, running as an antiwar environmentalist. He beat an 81-year-old incumbent in the Democratic primary and survived the McGovern undertow in November to win a House seat he has never relinquished. (Stark sold his bank after being elected; the proceeds made him a millionaire.)

His district has shifted over the years, reflecting population changes, but Stark's political base has always been the

industrial cities of Alameda County, a Democratic stronghold. The area he represents today is diverse — no one group constitutes a majority — and has one of the largest Indian American and Afghan American populations in the country. Only 20% of the registered voters are Republican. Stark won his last two elections with more than 70% support.

Although some wealth has spilled over from nearby Silicon Valley, the district is largely working class, filled with immigrant newcomers and union pensioners struggling to make it in one of the state's most expensive regions.

Their chief concern is "bread-and-butter issues," not ideology, said Dave Metz, a Democratic pollster who has taken many soundings of the area and consistently finds wide approval of Stark's performance.

That likely reflects the incumbent's history of strong constituent service and his many years spent writing much of the nation's healthcare legislation back when Democrats ran Congress. Among his achievements, Stark helped pushed through an expansion of Medicare and a law, commonly known as COBRA, that lets workers continue their healthcare coverage for a time after leaving their jobs. He consistently fell short, however, of his long-standing goal of universal healthcare coverage, which seems as distant today as ever.

Though clearly unhappy about being in the minority, Stark says he has never seriously thought of quitting Congress. He plans to stick around at least through the next redrawing of district boundaries in 2011, "As long as I don't get Alzheimer's, or something else falls off."

Stark says there is a "good chance" Republicans could lose control of the House in November, the way Democrats "got careless" after 40 years in power and allowed the GOP's 1994 takeover. Regardless, he is confident the political pendulum is due for a swing back toward the center. "Can't get much more to the political right," Stark says.

Even if Democrats fall short in the House, he hopes the party will at least win control of the Senate, gaining some leverage to force the GOP to cooperate with ranking Democrats like Stark, who remains an influential voice on healthcare policy.

"All I'd like to do is participate," Stark says, his voice rising plaintively. "I'm on the tax conference," he says of the committee that is supposed to hammer out differences between the House and Senate versions of legislation. "They won't even tell us where the meetings are."